

Building Effective Statewide

Professional Development Systems

A Conference Report



Partnership for Kentucky Schools

This report is based on “Building Effective Statewide Professional Development Systems: Learning from Each Other,” a January 2001 invitational conference organized by the Partnership for Kentucky Schools, Lexington, Kentucky. The two-day event was supported primarily by The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Annie E. Casey Foundation with additional support from The Humana Foundation. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of the Partnership or its funders. The Partnership has published a number of other reports on professional development in Kentucky schools. Those reports are listed at the end of this document.

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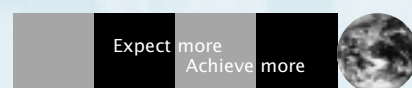
A Conference Report

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Prepared by Kelly Mazzoli

*The Education Writers and
Editors Group*

Louisville, Kentucky



Partnership for Kentucky Schools

600 Cooper Drive
Lexington, Kentucky 40502
tel 859.455.9595
fax 859.455.9797
email admin@pfks.org
web www.pfks.org

Speakers

Jane David

Bay Area Research Group

Martha Johnson

The Ashland Foundation

Carolyn Witt Jones

Partnership for Kentucky
Schools

Senator David Karem

Dan Lacy

Vice President
Ashland Inc.

Rep. Harry Moberly

Gene Wilhoit

Kentucky Commissioner of
Education

From Jessamine County Schools, Nicholasville, KY

Linda France

Superintendent

Sandy Adams

Jessamine County Project Based
Inquiry Teacher

Lisa Fowler

4th grade teacher, Nicholasville
Elementary

Barbara Greenlief

Jessamine County Project Based
Inquiry Teacher

Paul Hamann

Principal, Rosenwald Dunbar
Elementary

Chris Moss

Student, West Jessamine Middle
School

Meredith Murphy

Student, West Jessamine Middle
School

Beth Oliver

5th grade teacher, Rosenwalk
Dunbar Elementary

Char Williams

Instructional Supervisor

Evette Williams

Student, West Jessamine Middle
School

Lu Young

Assist. Superintendent for
Curriculum and Instruction

Partnership Professional Development Research Team

Pam Coe

Consultant

Tom Corcoran

Consortium for Policy
Research in Education

Jane David

Bay Area Research Group

Gail B. Gerry

Consultant

Patty Kannapel

Consultant

Joan Mazur

University of Kentucky

Bill McDiarmid

Institute of Social &
Economic Research
University of Alaska-Anchorage

Conference Participants

STATE TEAMS

ALASKA

Team Leader:

Bill McDiarmid

Director

Institute of Social
& Economic Research
University of Alaska Anchorage
Anchorage, AK

Scott Christian

Director

Professional Education Center
UAS
Juneau, AK

Barbara Thompson

Deputy Director
Division of Teaching
& Learning Support
Alaska Dept. of Education
and Early Development
Juneau, AK

IDAHO

Team Leader:

Phil Kelly

Assistant Professor
Boise State University
Boise, ID

Karen McGee

Vice President
Idaho State Board of Education
Pocatello, ID

Patricia Toney

Teacher Policy Coordinator
Idaho State Board of Education
Boise, ID

Robert West

Chief Deputy Superintendent
of Public Educ.
Idaho Department of Education
Boise, ID

KENTUCKY

Team Leader:

Gene Wilhoit

Commissioner of Education
Kentucky Department
of Education
Frankfort, KY

Lois Adams-Rodgers

Deputy Commissioner
Kentucky Department
of Education
Frankfort, KY

Sharon Bennett

Program Administrator
Professional Development
Kentucky Educational Television
Lexington, KY

Bonnie Brinly

Legislative Liaison
Kentucky Department
of Education
Frankfort, KY

Audrey Carr

Legislative Analyst
Education Committee Staff
Legislative Research
Commission
Frankfort, KY

Steve Clements

Associate Professor
Educational Policy Studies
and Evaluation
University of Kentucky
Lexington, KY

Sandra Deaton

Committee Staff Administrator
Legislative Research
Commission
Frankfort, KY

Linda France

Superintendent
Jessamine County Schools
Nicholasville, KY

Judith Gambill

President
Kentucky Education Association
Frankfort, KY

Carolyn Witt Jones

Executive Director
Partnership for
Kentucky Schools
Lexington, KY

Martha Johnson

Vice President
The Ashland Foundation
Covington, KY

David Keller

Executive Director
Kentucky School
Boards Association
Frankfort, KY

Nancy LaCount

Learning Strategies Branch
Kentucky Department
of Education
Frankfort, KY

Dan Lacy

Vice President
Corporate Affairs
Ashland Inc.
Covington, KY

Susan Leib

Executive Director
Education Professional
Standards Board
Frankfort, KY

Starr Lewis

Associate Commissioner
Kentucky Department
of Education
Frankfort, KY

Nawanna Privett

Executive Director
Collaborative Ctr. for
Literacy Development
Institute on Education Reform
University of Kentucky
Lexington, KY

Lynn Smith

Principal Assistant
Leadership and School
Improvement
Kentucky Department
of Education
Frankfort, KY

Jamie Spugnardi

Director
Region 2 Service Center
Bowling Green, KY

Diana Taylor

President
Taylor Communications, Inc.
Frankfort, KY

MAINE**Team Leader:****Nancy Jennings**

Assistant Professor
Bowdoin College
Brunswick, ME

Richard Barnes

Dean, College of Education
& Human Dev.
University of Southern Maine
Gorham, ME

Gordon Donaldson

Professor of Education
University of Maine
Orono, ME

Idella Harter

President
Maine Education Association
Augusta, ME

Bob McIntire

Special Services
Maine Department of Education
Augusta, ME

Patrick Philip

Assistant Superintendent
Windham School Dept.
Windham, ME

MARYLAND**Team Leader:****Mary Cary**

Asst. State Supt. for Professional
and Strategic Development
Maryland State Dept. of Education
Baltimore, MD

Dennis E. Hinkle

Dean, College of Education
Towson University
Towson, MD

June Streckfus

Executive Director
Maryland Business Roundtable
for Education
Baltimore, MD

Virginia Pilato

Chief
Program Approval and
Assessment Branch
Maryland State Department
of Education
Baltimore, MD

Lani Seikaly

Project Director
Maryland State Department
of Education
Baltimore, MD

Ron Thomas

Lecturer, College of Education
Towson University
Towson, MD

NEW MEXICO**Team Leader:****Peter Winograd**

Director
Center for Teacher Education
University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, NM

Charlotte Cooper

Policy Analyst
New Mexico Commission
on Higher Education
Albuquerque, NM

Kurt Kaufman

Director of Education Initiatives
Greater Albuquerque Chamber
of Commerce
Albuquerque, NM

Jacki Pieracci Riggs

President
The New Mexico Business
Roundtable
Albuquerque, NM

Bobbie Smith

Director
Collaborative for Professional
Development
University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, NM

RHODE ISLAND**Team Leader:****Susan Lusi**

Assistant Commissioner
Rhode Island Department
of Education
Providence, RI

Doris Anselmo

Interim Director
Teacher Certification
Rhode Island Department
of Education
Providence, RI

Colleen A. Callahan

Director of Professional Issues
RI Fed. of Teachers and
Health Professionals
Providence, RI

Diane Disanto

Director
Office of Instruction and
Work Force Development
Rhode Island Department
of Education
Providence, RI

Robert Hicks

Superintendent of Schools
Exeter-West Greenwich Schools
West Greenwich, RI

Kathleen Swann

Director
Rhode Island Teaching
and Learning Center
Coventry, RI

WASHINGTON**Team Leader:****Mike Knapp**

University of Washington
Seattle, WA

Steve Nielsen

Executive Director
Partnership for Learning
Seattle, WA

STAFF**Alice Davis****Ellen Skinner**



Dan Lacy, Ashland Inc.

Introduction

In 1990, when Kentucky passed the most comprehensive school reform law in the nation, many people thought the hard part was over. Putting in place an ambitious agenda for change seemed a stunning achievement for a state that had languished at the bottom of nearly every national education ranking for most of the 20th century. But beyond the high acclaim was a sobering challenge that has only recently become clear to some of the architects of the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) and to the states that are trying to learn from its example.

“We grossly underestimated the need for professional development...If I could go back and do anything differently regarding (KERA), it would be to put more money into teacher transition.”

One of the chief legislative supporters of Kentucky’s reform law, Senator David Karem, shared this and other insights at “Building Effective Statewide Professional Development Systems: Learning from Each Other,” an invitational conference held in Louisville,

Kentucky in January, 2001. The conference was organized by the Partnership for Kentucky Schools, a coalition of business leaders established in 1991 to promote public support and understanding of education issues in Kentucky.

The conference brought together policymakers, researchers, and education leaders from Kentucky and seven other states to hear lessons from Kentucky’s investment in

professional development. It was an opportunity to discuss the many issues and concerns for ongoing improvement of teacher learning in their respective states. In addition to Kentucky, teams represented Alaska, Idaho, Maine, Maryland, New Mexico, Rhode Island, and Washington.

This report begins with a brief history of Kentucky’s efforts to create an effective statewide system of professional development and highlights the role of research sponsored by the Partnership in those efforts. Kentucky’s story and role of research in adapting state professional development policies framed the conference discussions.

*“We grossly underestimated the need
for professional development.”*

Kentucky State Senator David Karem of Louisville

A background image showing two young girls, one on the left and one on the right, looking down at a computer screen. The image is faded and has a light blue tint. The girl on the right is wearing a striped shirt and has her hand on a keyboard.

Kentucky's Story

Kentucky's reforms set the stage for many positive changes in public education. In addition to distributing public tax dollars for education more equitably, KERA established higher academic standards and annual assessments that measure schools' progress in meeting those goals. Despite some early problems that were exacerbated by general opposition to outcomes-based education reforms, Kentucky's standards and accountability system today is considered among the top three in the nation.¹

One of the most dramatic examples of the legislature's serious intent to change Kentucky's system of public schools was the increased money available for teacher professional development. The state boosted its financial commitment from \$1 per student per year in 1990 to the current \$24 per student and, in 1994, gave individual schools authority to determine the use of 65 percent of that money, leaving district offices with control over the remaining 35 percent. Initially, the state permitted schools to set aside up to five paid school days — in addition to the previously required four days — for professional development.

¹*Quality Counts 2001*, a publication of *Education Week*, p. 94.

Kentucky backed up those resources by creating eight Regional Service Centers, branches of the Kentucky Department of Education whose staffs provide assistance to schools implementing the broad instructional changes KERA required. In addition, the Kentucky Department of Education selected and trained a group of talented teachers

and administrators — now called Highly Skilled Educators — to serve two-year assignments in schools whose test scores indicated they needed outside intervention.

Kentucky also gave individual schools considerable control over their budgets and required them to set up local school councils — comprised of the principal and elected teacher and parent representatives. These, for the first time, gave teachers a direct role in

shaping the school's curriculum and their own professional development.

The framework for change seemed solid and well designed, and legislators were confident that they had considered the most important issues necessary to support a new public education system. Because the reform law described the academic standards that students would be expected to meet, planners thought that Kentucky teachers would know how to create curriculum and design lessons that would help them achieve those learning goals. They assumed that professional development opportunities would reflect the reform law's major objectives. Legislators also believed that professional development would be more relevant and effective if local schools could determine the continuing education they needed and, in 1994, they amended KERA to include this provision. Finally, legislators thought teachers would become better consumers of professional development over time.

Despite these good intentions, shortcomings in the plan quickly began to surface. In hindsight, some of the assumptions made by KERA's creators seem naïve. Addressing the conference participants, Senator Karem said he believed that he and his legislative colleagues "grossly underestimated the need for professional development" when drafting the reform legislation. He explained that they undershot their goal in two major ways: Initially, they did not provide enough money or guidelines to help practicing teachers learn how to use the recommended instructional strategies. And they failed to make adequate accommodations for new teachers graduating from state universities whose coursework had not kept pace with the changing demands of education reform. Yet Kentucky was undertaking a series of reforms so far-reaching and interdependent that no blueprint existed for building this model of school change. And many of the people charged with the actual construction of the state's new education system didn't have the right tools to bring it to scale.

According to Jane David, a national education researcher and director of the Bay Area Research Group, the biggest problem with the design was the mismatch between teachers' preparation and the new student achievement targets they were supposed to reach. "If you want different results from kids, you need to teach teachers how to do things differently in the classroom, and that's what they, in many cases, haven't had the chance to learn to do," David explained.

For example, while Kentucky's reform law gave individual schools greater responsibility for deciding the focus of continuing education for teachers, it didn't tell schools *what* educators needed to learn or *how* they could learn it. The state department had no

*"If you want different results from kids,
you need to teach teachers how to do
things differently in the classroom..."*

Jane David, Bay Area Research Group

system in place to help educators make good choices among the various professional development offerings available or to provide better options. Teachers were being asked to change so many practices simultaneously that they initially sought to learn about new requirements and procedures, not how to make major changes in curriculum and instruction.

Meanwhile, the Kentucky Department of Education was trying to transform itself from a regulatory agency to a service agency with only a sketchy understanding of what the latter role entailed. The state department had limited authority, resources, and capacity to effectively help all the schools that needed assistance.

“We struggled with who does what in the early stages and with the line of reporting,” acknowledged Gene Wilhoit, Kentucky’s Commissioner of Education.

Wilhoit said officials with the state Department of Education did not always deliver the right messages when they interacted with schools. The new accountability system, which included rewards and sanctions, was often seen as punitive and “caused schools to panic,” he said. “I think when you have a group of people who weren’t held to a standard for so many years, that’s normal.”

Despite these barriers, almost all of the schools that received assistance from Highly Skilled Educators improved their test scores in the next round of the state’s assessment, although many had difficulty maintaining the pace of improvement after the intervention period ended.

When small but vocal groups of opponents challenged specific features of Kentucky’s reforms, they caused less-informed citizens to question the entire plan. Leaders of the reforms, therefore, were forced to spend an inordinate amount of time defending the reforms instead of strengthening their implementation.

“We developed a sort of bunker mentality to stave off the opponents,” recalled State Representative Harry Moberly of Richmond. “That caused a delay in enhancements such as PD [professional development]....”



*Lynn Smith, Kentucky
Department of Education*



Lessons from Kentucky Research

Leaders of the Partnership for Kentucky Schools recognized that ongoing teacher education was critical to the successful implementation of the law, and they suspected that inconsistent and ineffective professional development was a major reason why Kentucky schools showed uneven progress over several testing cycles.

In 1993, the Partnership engaged a team of national and Kentucky-based education researchers to find out how professional development was working for Kentucky teachers and what the state could do to improve it. The research team also sought to inform policymakers about ways they could adjust and expand the support for educators to ensure that all children had access to high-quality classroom instruction.

To better understand professional development in Kentucky schools, the research team launched a series of studies. In their earliest report, researchers conducted case studies of 21 schools that represented every geographical part of the state, then analyzed the professional development plans and activities of a random sample of 77 schools. From this initial review, the researchers concluded that professional development, with teachers in charge, had changed for the better.

“One of the most wonderful things about KERA is the professional development,” one middle school teacher told the researchers. “In 17 years [before KERA] we never had anything designed to improve your teaching.”

Teachers at the case study schools reported that the continuing education they received since 1990 had improved in quality, relevance, and application. As one elementary teacher said: “Used to be you got a big book and if something sounded interesting you picked it. Or the district would say ‘Do this’ whether you wanted it or needed it or whether it was at the right level.” The researchers also found that teachers at some schools were assuming additional responsibility for improving their skills, such as establishing collegial study groups, even when these efforts meant they had to work longer hours without additional compensation.

However, sustaining high-quality professional development proved difficult because of unyielding school schedules, limited learning opportunities, and scarce guidance about what teachers needed to know. Researchers found that many schools continued to use traditional forms of professional development, such as brief “canned” workshops or sessions focusing on discipline or complying with federal and state regulations. In general, schools in Kentucky, like those across the nation, continued to contract with professional development providers whose services were never evaluated for effectiveness.

Some teachers did embrace Kentucky’s education reforms and assumed personal responsibility for enacting them. But many others who might have been supportive languished in schools where poor leadership limited their ability to observe and practice better instructional practices. This lack of exposure to improved instruction and deeper subject matter knowledge slowed widespread progress. Many times, when teachers seriously pursued new instructional techniques, they discovered that the only professional development available focused on improving test scores by preparing students for specific components of the annual assessments. In fact, the high-stakes environment encouraged teachers to seek professional development that offered ‘quick fixes.’

“We have a lot of people who are doing really hard work but aren’t doing work that improves [student] achievement,” Commissioner Wilhoit acknowledged.

Researchers also suspected that many Kentucky teachers lacked sufficient understanding in their major subject areas to help students meet the state’s rigorous academic standards. Bill McDiarmid, a member of the Kentucky research team and director of the Institute of Social and Economic Research at the University of Alaska at Anchorage, gave this example: The Kentucky Department of Education’s Core Content for Assessment expects 5th graders to understand basic properties of probability and statistics, yet many elementary teachers did not learn these concepts in college.

“At a minimum, teachers need to know the information, ideas, and procedures their students are expected to learn,” McDiarmid reported. “In an age of ‘new standards,’ however, teachers sometimes encounter ideas and information they did not encounter as students.”

The problem is particularly noticeable at the middle school level because teachers are not required to have middle school certification or a college major in the subjects they are teaching. This may explain in part why test scores in Kentucky’s middle schools consistently lag behind those at the elementary and high school levels.

“One of the most wonderful things about KERA is the professional development. In 17 years [before KERA] we never had anything designed to improve your teaching.”

A middle school teacher



*Phil Kelly,
Boise State University*

“We have a lot of teachers teaching with general knowledge certification who don’t have the subject matter knowledge,” one Kentucky middle school principal told the researchers. “I have been against colleges putting people out with these degrees.”

In his 1999 report, *Still Missing After All These Years*, McDiarmid cited many other studies that revealed similar gaps in teacher preparation and professional development nationwide. Along with the need to create more high-quality professional development experiences, researchers have found that leadership at the school and district level is essential for improving the focus and quality of professional development for teachers. Although putting teachers in charge of professional development yielded positive results, the benefits were limited by lack of guidance and opportunities to learn.

That conclusion was backed up by experiences in Kentucky. In 1999, the Partnership and the Prichard

Committee for Academic Excellence, another public advocacy group, invited educators and parents from the 31 Kentucky public schools that had consistently improved their test scores over a six-year period to talk about their successes. All said their faculties had:

- Received strong leadership and encouragement from the school principal
- Aligned their instruction with the state’s assessment
- Set high performance expectations for teachers, students, and parents
- Established common planning times for teachers and found support through teams and ongoing collaborations
- Learned how to help students apply knowledge rather than strictly memorize facts

“Teachers are in a constant cycle of growth,” explained Chris Luvisi, principal of Oldham County’s Goshen Elementary School, one of the state’s top performers. “We constantly create opportunities for them to talk to each other. It takes more time, but they own it.”

Luvisi said his school’s emphasis on professional development ensures that “we focus more on the individual child rather than putting them through a curriculum that doesn’t make any sense.”

“Professional development keeps teachers learning, which creates a learning environment,” said Duane Tennant, Glasgow Independent School District Superintendent, at the same meeting. “When staff become excited about what they’re learning, they pass that along to the school.”

Glasgow High School teacher Becky Kingery talked about how she and a colleague took it upon themselves to find and take a college course that would show them how to use manipulative items to solve mathematical equations. Although it wasn’t a technique they had learned during college, their students needed it, so the teachers decided it was their obligation to learn it, too.

“I think all of us had to give up something,” Kingery said. “You have to be flexible. You have to go to an area where you feel a little uncomfortable, like, if you’ve always taught a certain way or a certain thing, you might need to change that if it’s not good for the student. You have to be open to whatever is good for the student.”

In short, these educators focus on improving their own learning as much as the learning of their students, no longer relying on practices that reach only some students. Unfortunately, their attitudes are still the exception rather than the rule in Kentucky.

“When staff become excited about what they’re learning, they pass that along to the school.”

Duane Tennant, Kentucky



*Susan Lusi, Rhode Island
Department of Education*

The Partnership researchers found a great deal of inconsistency, particularly among school district leaders. Some forged strong relationships with schools and helped them develop leadership capacity at the building level, which led to better instruction and test score improvements. Other district leaders adopted a hands-off approach, however, which created a stalemate between schools and the central office over who should take charge of professional development.

The Partnership researchers examined districts that had helped school faculties benefit from professional development and discovered that they shared six leadership strategies. The most effective district leaders:

- Focus on instruction
- Strategically engage teachers in professional development
- Understand the necessity of incentives
- Persist over time
- Place a priority on curriculum content
- Pay attention to quality

“The big message here is that teacher learning is really key,” Jane David said. “And it’s not a one-shot deal.”

Kentucky schools are not where reform supporters — or detractors — want them to be, but the state has made some important gains, such as moving more students to a proficient level of achievement. Kentucky also has advanced to the average level or higher in most national education rankings.

Tom Corcoran, co-director of the Consortium for Policy Research in Education at the University of Pennsylvania and a member of the Kentucky research team, attributes this progress to the comprehensive nature of the state’s reform law, which replaced a politically controlled, poorly financed education system with one that enabled the most schools to compete on an even playing field for the first time. “There was a lot that made people feel a sense of possibility here. You can’t overlook that,” he said. “There was a sense that people had control over their own destinies.”

Corcoran praised state policymakers for making adjustments to the reform law when necessary and paying attention to what research revealed about its implementation. “This is more than a story that had design flaws, and it’s more than a story of triumphs of reforms,” he said. “It’s a story of continuous improvement and how the governor and legislators have been willing to go back and make changes. And they continue to wrestle with that.”

*“At a minimum, teachers need to know
the information, ideas, and procedures
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Bill McDiarmid, University of Alaska–Anchorage



Impact of Research on Policy

Traditionally in education circles, research and policy have been strange bedfellows. Rarely do leaders of both circles connect, let alone share their insights and ideas. Yet, in Kentucky, that is exactly what has happened.

Education leaders and others say research has helped refine Kentucky's reforms for several reasons. One is the willingness of state policymakers to listen to advice and seek improvements in the model of school change they created. Another reason is the Partnership's role in sponsoring the research and including different people in the conversations that shape and review it. A third contributing factor is the reputation of the researchers who have established credibility among players in the education and policymaking fields.

In 1994, the Partnership for Kentucky Schools established the Partnership Policymaker Roundtable, a group of researchers, state policymakers, and education, business, and civic leaders, that continues to meet twice a year to discuss the latest findings of the Partnership's research team and consider the potential policy implications.

At Roundtable meetings, the policymakers benefit from the rare opportunity to engage in open conversations with different parties all focused on a common goal, to hear various perspectives on improving professional development for teachers, and to reflect on the successes and problems of the educational system. The research team uses

the meetings to gather valuable feedback. They describe their plans before they begin collecting data to ensure that they include issues that are important to policymakers. And when writing, they use language common to policymakers instead of education jargon.

“I think one of the values has been the discussion from different professionals of their perspective of what they were observing in Kentucky versus those of us that were sort of in the fray,” said Audrey Carr, a former Kentucky Department of Education official and one of the original participants in the Roundtable. “The Roundtable has been useful in identifying questions that needed to be asked.”

To Carolyn Witt Jones, executive director of the Partnership for Kentucky Schools, “the Roundtable is an opportunity to share with many audiences what our researchers are learning before it comes out as a final report. I cannot emphasize enough the value of bringing policymakers and researchers together to engage in constructive dialogue in a safe environment.”

Connie Allen, principal of William Natcher Elementary School in western Kentucky, is another strong supporter of the roundtable process. Understanding the researchers’ plans and then hearing the results of their professional development studies was very helpful, she said, because the researchers found out what “teachers in the state say they need.” Being included in a group with leaders from many arenas sent another important message to Allen. “People listened to what you had to say, and you felt valued as a member of the group.”

Carr, now with Kentucky’s Legislative Research Commission, said the Roundtable is one way that the Partnership has brought the need for ongoing professional development to the forefront of policy discussions and to the attention of the general public. In addition to the roundtable discussions, Partnership researchers have spoken to a variety of groups and individuals throughout the course of their work, including formally testifying before legislative committees and gubernatorial task forces, presenting to the Kentucky Board of Education, participating in seminars with Kentucky Department of Education staff, and conducting informal discussions with policymakers as issues arise.

“To have all that done by an outside entity because they care about education is a rarity,” Commissioner Wilhoit said.

The Partnership also has produced ongoing reports of the research on professional development and has forged a solid working relationship with the state Department of Education. Besides the studies of how teachers choose and use professional development, researchers investigated the impact of two state programs designed to strengthen teachers and administrators — the Highly Skilled Educators intervention in low-performing schools and its offshoot, the Kentucky Leadership Academy, which targeted district and school administrators.

“The Highly Skilled Educators [program] has helped bring about abrupt improvement in [low-performing] schools, but there’s a lot more to do in terms of building capacity of districts to support individual schools to maintain the progress on their own,” Wilhoit said. He believes the research has helped the Department of Education better understand the need to increase the role of district staff and principals in leading professional development.

“The Roundtable is an opportunity to share with many audiences what our researchers are learning before it comes out as a final report.”

Carolyn Witt Jones, Kentucky



*Patrick Phillip (L), Windham School Department
Richard Barnes (R), University of Southern Maine*

“Having an independent entity [such as the Partnership] is going to be essential” to moving forward with reform, he said.

State policies also reflect the influence of the Partnership’s work. Consistent with researchers’ recommendations, new professional development legislation in 1998 established subject-matter academies for middle school teachers and provided incentives

for teachers to earn certification by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. More policymakers are beginning to understand that quality professional development is essential for good teaching and that good teaching leads to higher student achievement. As a result, the state’s Regional Service Centers have changed their focus from reform components to core academic areas.

“These lawmakers need to see evidence of what the professional development money does for students.”

Kentucky State Senator David Karem of Louisville

As Carr noted, research sponsored by the Partnership for Kentucky Schools also has informed public opinion, possibly the biggest remaining challenge to widespread understanding of and support for highly skilled teachers. State Senator Karem believes the research team’s work has helped fill some critical gaps in the public’s knowledge of what it takes to improve student achievement.

The research also helps legislators understand what their investment in public has produced. Karem and Moberly, his colleague in the state’s General Assembly, both say they depend on the Partnership’s research and credibility to provide evidence for continuing or tweaking reform measures. Moberly can cite chapter and verse of published research when introducing legislation to improve professional development options in Kentucky. Research is his tool for reasoning with skeptical colleagues who are worried that they might lose votes by supporting his causes.

“I know these guys want to have something solid to fall back on when they make a commitment that voters might not understand or think is necessary,” Moberly explained.

Karem said he uses the research differently. He gleans from it the anecdotes that he believes represent his best connection with his Senate colleagues, who respond to the emotional impact of heartwarming stories.

“These lawmakers need to see evidence of what the professional development money does for students,” Karem said.



*Jane David,
Bay Area Research Group*



Conference Conversations: Professional Development Challenges in Other States

The seven state teams invited to Kentucky—Alaska, Idaho, Maine, Maryland, New Mexico, Rhode Island, Washington—are all in the process of strengthening their education systems. In light of Kentucky’s experiences, the conference participants grappled with two fundamental questions:

- How can state policymakers create effective professional development systems that provide courses offering new knowledge and instructional skills in addition to continual on-the-job-training for all teachers?
- What can state policymakers do to ensure that their efforts will be matched by the political support, funding, and time necessary to develop and sustain these systems?

Discussion of these questions led to conversations about what states are able to achieve, where they encounter obstacles, and whether researchers can play a constructive role in efforts to improve teacher learning as they have in Kentucky. Despite many differences across the states represented, they discovered common challenges in their quest to improve teacher quality.

Igniting Teachers' Interest

Participants and panelists during the conference agreed that most teachers truly want to do their jobs better, particularly with increasing performance pressures brought on by politicians and reform laws. The challenge is getting these educators, many of them having been burned by bureaucratic rules or turned off by ineffective professional

“Teachers often gravitate to workshops that will give them techniques they can use in their classrooms tomorrow.”

Diane DiSanto, Rhode Island

development, to seek new ways to strengthen the curriculum and improve their instruction. Few teachers have experienced continuing education that encourages them to learn from each other through on-the-job mentoring and shadowing, sharing lesson plans and student work in faculty meetings, or networking with colleagues in other schools.

“It’s very difficult to go through [a long-term] process because you need something you can do tomorrow,” said Diane DiSanto, director of the Office of Instruction and Work Force Development for the Rhode Island Department of Education.

Idella Harter, president of the Maine Education Association, pointed out that professional development planning too often occurs without teachers, a process she considers inherently flawed. As a classroom teacher, Harter said, she usually wanted to embrace reform measures and new ideas, but in a way that allowed her to incorporate them into what was good about her existing practices. But reform advocates don’t make it clear that such hybrid approaches are acceptable, she said.

“I used to feel like I had to close my [classroom] door to do what I knew I needed to do” to help teach students, Harter said.

She encouraged the conference participants to consider the classroom teacher’s perspective and input as they planned professional development improvements within their respective states.

“I think one of the reasons we haven’t provided very well is because we don’t understand the developmental journey of teachers very well,” acknowledged Gordon Donaldson, a professor of education at the University of Maine.

Yet, the reverse is also true, Diane DiSanto suggested. The challenge in Rhode Island, she said, is getting teachers to understand that they must continue learning on the job so they don’t develop tunnel vision. “Teachers often gravitate to workshops that will give them techniques they can use in their classrooms tomorrow. This can result in a cookbook approach to teaching. They often need to be more strongly grounded in the whole process of understanding how children become proficient . . .”

More teachers might warm to education reform if they understood how the recommended instructional practices could help them on a daily basis, such as preventing students’ misbehavior, said Mike Knapp of the University of Washington. He cited research demonstrating that a teacher’s lack of subject knowledge contributes to classroom management problems.

“The inability [of a teacher] to engage a student in math leads to a student’s misbehavior,” he explained. Compounding the problem in Washington, he said, is uneven access to professional development across the state.

None of the states does a good job of providing incentives for teachers to embrace training opportunities that will advance their knowledge and skills, the conference participants agreed. Patty Toney, teacher policy coordinator with the Idaho State Board

of Education, said her state has one of the highest numbers of National Board certified teachers in the nation because the Albertson Foundation underwrote the costs to teachers. Idaho does provide a \$2,000 annual reward to teachers who retain the ranking for five years despite the fact that their certification lasts for 10 years.

After Dick Barnes of the University of Southern Maine lamented that his state offers no extra money to reward National Board certified teachers, Colleen Callahan suggested that states consider other kinds of incentives for high-achieving teachers, “such as continuing education or graduate credits or other professional recognition.” Callahan, of the Rhode Island Federation of Teachers and Health Professionals, believes that meaningful professional development serves as an incentive itself. States should ensure that all courses are grounded in adult learning theory and are designed to meet practitioners’ needs. “They might even adopt a slogan such as Ford’s ‘Quality is Job One,’ so that people understand the purpose of professional development,” she said.

A lack of understanding of the benefits of professional development plagues Maryland educators, too, according to June Streckfus. She urged education leaders and policymakers to do a better job of countering teachers’ poor perceptions of professional development. “We send negative messages that [professional development] is remediation and not a growth and continuing education opportunity,” said Streckfus, executive director of the Maryland Business Roundtable for Education.

Phil Kelly, an assistant professor at Boise State University, identified a persistent problem in Idaho. He said the most popular professional development courses, such as ways to use new technology, tend to have the least impact on changing classroom practice, while the least popular options, which include courses to strengthen teachers’ subject matter knowledge, are more likely to improve instruction.

If opportunities exist but teachers are choosing others that aren’t likely to help as much, then “I think part of our role is to inform the demand,” said Scott Christian, director of the Professional Education Center at the University of Alaska.

Tom Corcoran, of the Partnership’s research team, summarized the challenges for states as they try to improve teacher preparation: “How do you get schools to be educated consumers of professional development, and how do you create high-quality learning opportunities for teachers?” He suggested that states encourage schools to create environments that support adult learning, establish formal courses and institutes outside of schools, and form networks of instructors who teach the same subjects in a particular district or state.



*Gene Wilhoit, Commissioner
of Education, Kentucky
Department of Education*

Balancing supply and demand

Once teachers see the benefits of strengthening their professional knowledge and skills, they often discover that the demand for such learning exceeds the supply. As states move away from the traditional professional development ‘menus’ that list hundreds of available sessions, they find few good alternatives.

In light of this, Rhode Island’s conference participants considered developing a better menu. They bandied about the idea of designing a new professional development system based on items designed to satisfy many tastes.

“How do you support the menu so that what works in Coventry can work in [other towns]?” asked Callahan, of the state’s teacher’s union. “How do you support that exchange, but not make the expectation that, ‘This is the only way you can use your PD [professional development] money?’ We need nutritionally balanced PD.”



Mary Cary, Maryland State
Department of Education

Some state leaders explored other approaches, such as an Internet clearinghouse of professional development offerings. But all of them acknowledged that substance must take precedence over format.

“We need to move from learning results to actual changes in instruction and how the state will help support that,” said Harter, adding that Maine has not done much more than “mapping our needs.”

Peter Winograd, director of the Center for Teacher Education at the University of New Mexico, said: “We really need a plan” that aligns instruction with standards. “We need a system for thinking about professional development.”

Like Kentucky, New Mexico receives very high marks nationally for its standards and accountability measures but poorer grades for teacher quality. New Mexico leaders are starting to realize that clearly delineated standards and accountability measures mean little without professional development that shows teachers how to interpret them.

“We need to focus on making sure schools know what to ask for and how to get it,” Rhode Island’s Lusi said. “And we need to think about professional development for professional developers, because there is a long-term support system that will be needed.”

Mike Knapp of the University of Washington suggested that part of the responsibility for supplying the demand rests with state department of education employees who “need to be teachers and...need to be involved in teaching and learning” before they can establish a good delivery system.

Donaldson, of the University of Maine, wondered if thinking about professional development in terms of supply and demand was the right approach. “I don’t think we need to develop a system that makes the state [department of education] seem like the controller and an outside entity,” he explained. Such an approach might prevent professional development from becoming job-embedded, he said.

Rhode Island’s DiSanto agreed. “I think we need to think about building a system of capacity at the local level and not the state level” and to think of professional development as “reflective practice,” she said. “I think we need to look at developing a system that builds capacity, not *delivers* [professional development].”

Some states are working toward that end, according to Mary Cary, assistant state superintendent for Professional and Strategic Development at the Maryland Department of Education. In 1996, Cary said, Maryland leaders recognized that teachers want to assume ownership for their learning opportunities. So they introduced a program “that was very forward thinking because it focused on site-based professional development.”

But, like Kentucky, Maryland has struggled to achieve consistent results in all schools. “We have the spectrum of needs in professional development,” Cary said. “We have the veteran leaders and teachers who believe they will leave before they have to embrace the reforms in education, and we have the new leaders and teachers who want and need mentoring and training so they can implement the reforms.”

As Corcoran suggested previously, regular collaboration with colleagues in the same field is an important component of continuous teacher learning and of supplying the demand. A high school physics teacher, for example, becomes more proficient if he or she has regular communication with colleagues who teach the same subject at other high schools in the same district or state, much like networks of legal or financial professionals who specialize in a particular discipline.

But setting up these networks is a daunting task in many rural states, especially Alaska, where the state’s geography and sparse population make face-to-face collaboration difficult. McDiarmid, the Kentucky research team member from the University of Alaska,

said Alaska has introduced a virtual professional development roundtable of teachers to work around these geographical barriers.

In states that don't have to contend with Alaska's geographical isolation, finding time to meet is still tough. Most school schedules provide little, if any, time for working outside the building during regular hours. As the Partnership's researchers discovered in Kentucky, however, educators who thrive in the age of reform usually assume responsibility for increasing their professional knowledge and skills, even if they have to work beyond the regular school day or adjust the schedule.

Dennis Hinkle, dean of the College of Education at Towson University in Maryland, said that regardless of any laws that provide for additional professional development time, "it's a *culture* that causes professional development to flourish and become a way of life in schools."

Generating support for teacher learning

Few people understand that providing continuing education for teachers is just as important as professional training in other arenas. In corporate America, for example, employees routinely receive assistance in building their skills. They take courses to pursue advanced degrees or certifications and attend seminars in how to use new forms of technology, improve customer service, and negotiate savings, among others. In the government sector, states permit employees at all levels to attend seminars and conferences designed to help them become more effective in their jobs. The assumption is that employees come to the their jobs with a certain level of knowledge but will need more skills to keep up and to advance.

Yet, governments tend to put far more onus on education leaders to prove the need for professional development for teachers. During the 2000 Kentucky General Assembly, legislators easily approved measures to expand tax incentives for companies relocating to or expanding in the state. Only after lengthy appeals from a coalition that included the Partnership for Kentucky Schools and national researchers did the legislature agree to increase the money earmarked for continuing education for teachers.

Leaders in other states find themselves in similar predicaments. "One of the issues we wrestle with is, 'How do you capture the public will to support it [professional development]?' " said Donaldson, of the University of Maine. The state's sparse population creates lower than normal student-teacher ratios, so justifying additional money for professional development is difficult.

In Alaska, Bill McDiarmid has used his experience as a member of the Partnership research team to improve conditions in Alaska. Like their colleagues in Idaho, the team members from Alaska are eager to build on what others have learned. Since the January conference, McDiarmid has used research findings on school district leadership in Kentucky to help design the Alaska Staff Development Council's new professional development program.

In Maryland, before education leaders lobbied the state legislature for additional professional development funds, they tried but failed to determine the total amount the state was spending up that point. Although hampered by poor record keeping and overlapping departmental budgets, the lack of documentation unfortunately sends a message to policymakers and the public that existing resources are being wasted. In that

"It's a culture that causes professional development to flourish and become a way of life in schools."

Dennis Hinkle, Maryland

environment, it's hard to make the case that schools need more money to help teachers learn new skills.

Another common problem is sustaining professional development once funding dries up. Bob McIntire, of the Maine Department of Education, said educators in his state gained access to more professional development opportunities after the federal government intervened to fix Maine's schools. But when the money was gone, so was the interest in improving teacher quality.

"Our biggest challenge is overcoming resistance to change because there's a lot of comfort" with the status quo, McIntire added.

"There needs to be a group such as the Partnership for Kentucky Schools to step up and lead the way and sponsor the research."

Jane David, Partnership research team

Steve Nielson, executive director of the Washington-based Partnership for Learning, said part of the difficulty of securing stronger public and legislative support for professional development is that leaders don't see it as an investment in human capital.

Lois Adams-Rodgers, associate commissioner of the Kentucky Department of Education, concurred. She remembers getting frustrated on many occasions over the past decade when members of the state legislature asked: "When will we not have to put so much money into professional development? Aren't you all finished yet?"

Conference participants discussed the importance of building support for professional development among educators, state department of education officials, and the general public and showing them how their needs and interests are connected.

"This is an issue of workforce development, not professional development," said Winograd, of the University of New Mexico.

During the Kentucky conference, the New Mexico legislature was considering a major initiative, which they passed in March 2001. It provides liberal incentives for teachers to attain additional certification and advanced degrees. The bill also aims to reverse New Mexico's practice of providing professional development funds only to successful schools and not to those in crisis.

Winograd is hopeful that these changes will improve the state's schools. But he's also a realist. He taught at the University of Kentucky in the early 1990s and observed KERA's early progress and growing pains, so he understands better than most that legislating change doesn't guarantee its acceptance.

Demonstrating results

One way to generate support for any initiative is to demonstrate its positive impact, yet states have not done a good job of documenting the results of teacher professional development. How do states measure what schools are doing, whether it's effective, and how much it costs?

"We have no data collection to prove success or results," McIntire noted. "We're not doing that well."

Knapp of the University of Washington noted that his state has no systems in place to measure or manage professional development. "If it happens, it's left to the districts," he said. Kelly, of Idaho, added "Right now, [the process is about] just amassing clock hours not connected to anything."

Demonstrating results offers a unique set of challenges, said Maryland's Mary Cary. "When we talk about PD [professional development], the focus becomes the assessment. We are turning the spotlight away from what the teacher is doing or designing to what the student is doing and learning."

How do you draw a line that connects a student's work to his teacher's professional development? Kentucky officials continue to struggle with that issue, said Starr Lewis, associate commissioner of the state's department of education. "I don't think we know yet how to look at it [student work] in a really deep way so that it can tell us about teacher quality."

Simply knowing how professional development dollars are spent is hard to come by. "We don't have an infrastructure yet to get the information out," Donaldson, of Maine, said. National researchers agree, and they suggest that developing such systems would greatly increase the ability of state departments of education to persuade legislators and the general public to support additional spending on professional development. Most states currently define professional development by the amount of money they allocate for it, such as Kentucky's \$24 per student or Maine's \$12. But those numbers don't tell the full story, says Ellen Guiney, executive director of the Boston Plan for Excellence. The Boston Plan, along with The Pew Charitable Trusts and the New American Schools, conducted a detailed study of spending in four urban school districts that are in the throes of reform. The study revealed that spending was spread across so many departments and budgets that no one knew how schools used the money provided for professional development. More importantly, such fragmentation leads to inefficiencies and inconsistencies that could be solved by coordinating the resources.

Tracking the expenditures and studying the implementation and impact of formal and informal professional development can contribute to a stronger system. As Corcoran pointed out, research has helped Kentucky improve its methods of preparing teachers by identifying problems and solutions. He encouraged other states to develop similar structures when they begin their work to improve teacher quality. Kentucky's key strengths, he said, include:

Leadership and consistent support from a core group of legislators who have been in office for the duration of the state's education reform process

The strong presence of organizations such as the Partnership for Kentucky Schools and the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence and the financial support from corporations and foundations that have kept the state focused on the need for change.

A group of researchers who have been involved long enough to establish trust among the many education groups and other interested parties in the state.

David, of the Partnership research team, put it plainly: "There needs to be a group such as the Partnership for Kentucky Schools to step up and lead the way and sponsor the research."



*Peter Winograd,
University of New Mexico*



Going Forward

As these eight state teams collaborated to identify the challenges of creating effective professional development systems, Kentucky's decade-long experience framed the conversations. It illustrated the power of continuous learning by policymakers, the importance of a long-term commitment, and the contributions of ongoing research.

Kentucky began by recognizing the need for professional development to help teachers meet the demands of high academic standards, but the scope of the task was not initially evident. State leaders now realize that improving teacher quality depends on several factors: schools creating environments that support adult learning, the state establishing academies where teachers of the same subjects can deepen their knowledge, universities providing pre-service and continuing education courses that are tied to the state's standards, and educators searching for ways to fit professional development into an already full school schedule.

"It's a real delicate balance between keeping the pressure on and not causing a rebellion," Commissioner Wilhoit said. "Our teachers are tired. They've been at it for 10 years. So, what we do to support them in the future is critical."

In the months since the January conference, team members from several states have reported on different ways the discussions at the Kentucky conference have influenced

their thinking about professional development for teachers. Mary Cary, for one, appreciated the focus on next steps. “Our discussions were in depth, but they were also forward thinking... ‘where do we want to be?’ We thought about what do we really want to see, and forward movement in professional development circles depends on that kind of rich dialogue.”

She came away convinced that a concerted focus on district leadership was a critical missing piece in Maryland. “Our next step has to focus on district leaders.... These are the people who are supposed to be crafting the professional development for others.”

Phil Kelly said that because Idaho is in the very early stages of school reform, “the conference helped us realize we don’t have to do this from scratch.” He is studying and developing policy recommendations for teacher professional development. “At the same time, there’s going to be another team working on teacher certification and the two groups will be working in a parallel fashion so that the PD [professional development] policies and the teacher certification policies are mutually supportive.”

The teacher certification team is a direct result of the four Idaho representatives attending the Kentucky conference, Kelly said. “Just being exposed to ideas like that... has produced tremendous benefits. I can’t over report how beneficial the conference was to us in Idaho.”

Bill McDiarmid has used his experience as a member of the Partnership research team to improve conditions in Alaska. Like their colleagues in Idaho, the team members from Alaska are eager to build on what others have learned. Since the January conference, McDiarmid has presented research findings on school district leadership in Kentucky and contributed to the design of the Alaska Staff Development Council’s new professional development program.

Several participants described the lasting value of assembling leaders to discuss common issues. Cary said she particularly liked the team structure used at the conference “because it brought together people who knew each other but had not worked together as a group. We left Kentucky as a team with common goals in mind for professional development in Maryland. That was an extraordinary benefit of the team structure.”

Her department recently joined forces with another team member to develop a technology grant. They also are working with the higher education representatives who were at the conference to expand professional development throughout Maryland’s university system. “Those relationships grew out of the Kentucky experience,” Cary explained.

Several state teams regularly communicate with each other and are looking for opportunities to get together in the future. Conference participants suggested many ways in which their conversations could continue. Peter Winograd, for example, asked the Partnership for Kentucky Schools for help developing a proposal that other states can use when soliciting funds from corporations and foundations. He also suggested that the states could develop a Web site to share their work.

Corcoran offered some guidance to the guests from other states on using research effectively. “It’s not just a matter of convening a group of researchers,” he said, “but of looking at who within your state is doing good work and could be brought together and involved in a long-term process around PD [professional development] or any other issue. All of the players [in Kentucky] think they’ve benefited and that’s why they keep coming back.... They think the conversation has been worthwhile.”

“Just being exposed to ideas like that... has produced tremendous benefits. I can’t over report how beneficial the conference was to us.”

Phil Kelly, Idaho

So does Carolyn Witt Jones, the Partnership's executive director. She described the January conference as a beginning conversation about shared challenges in building effective professional development systems.

"The issue of how to provide quality professional development support to teachers continues to be a complicated one. There are no simple answers. Nor can we assume that state policy alone will take care of all the challenges that surround how classrooms should be structured and how the curriculum should be developed. The ultimate goal is for all students to learn and at high levels. This is no easy task. The mix of effective policy and practice at both the state and local levels warrants a deliberate discussion that will continue for as long as we have the commitment to continuous education improvement for all schools and all students. No one conference or series of meetings will be sufficient. The Partnership for Kentucky Schools will continue to facilitate deliberation of professional development research and practice, however difficult these discussions may be. We will always ask others to join in this work."



*Carolyn Witt Jones,
Partnership for
Kentucky Schools*

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